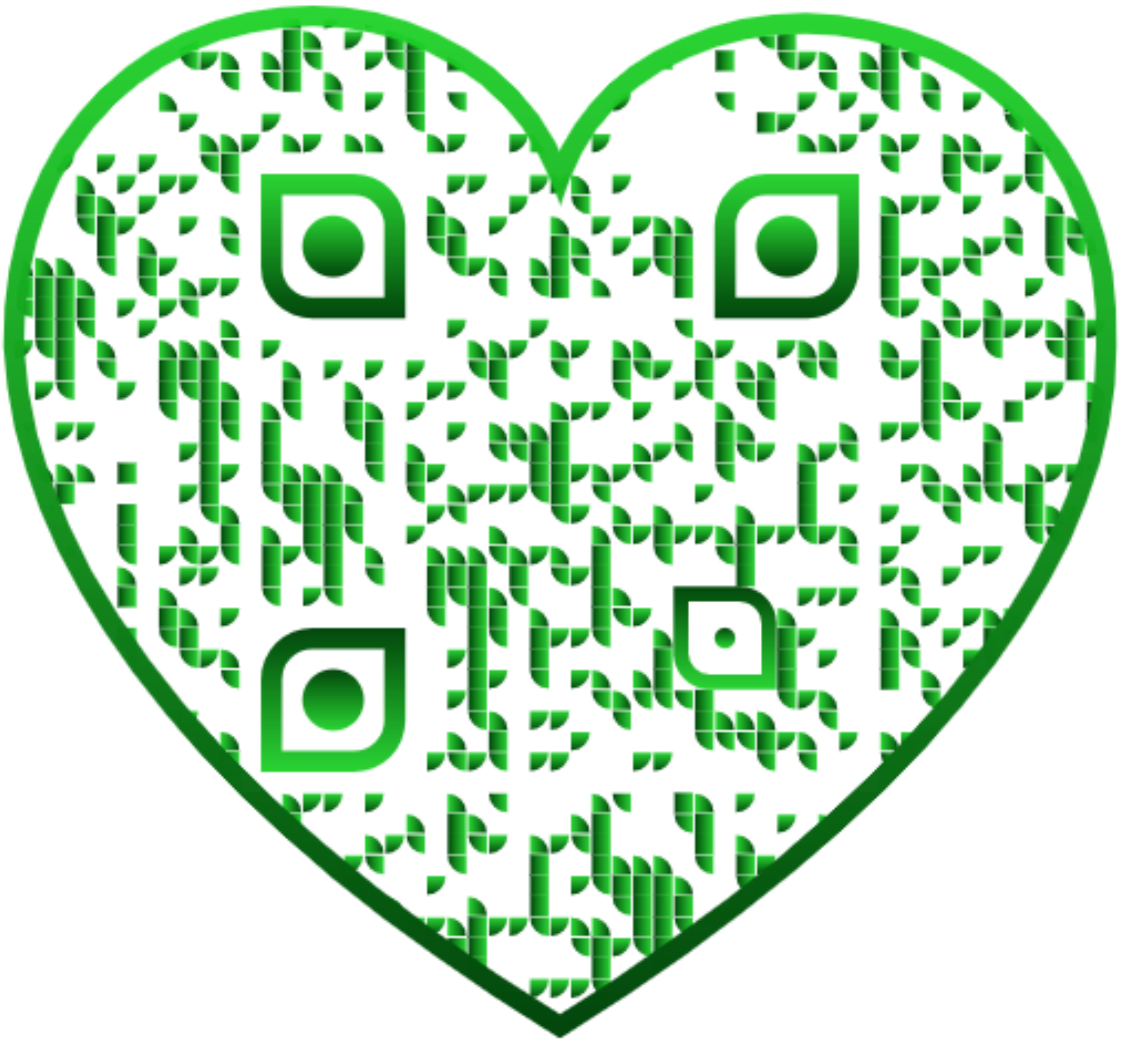
THE CONCISE BOOK OF CULTS

GEORGE H. MARTIN



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Preface

English speakers are familiar with the grammatical construction "not this, but that." The expression is used to clarify a meaning or to set a boundary around an idea or a problem. For instance, the tire salesman might explain to a customer, "Well, your problem *is not* the valve stem, as you thought. Rather, the problem *is* a nail in your tire." That explanation clarifies the problem and tells the customer what he needs to do in order to solve it.

Clarification. That's a good thing! Picking up a book, an interested reader will wish, quickly, to have a sense of the contents and purpose of the book. The title of this book – *The Concise Book of Cults* – should go a long way toward identifying the book's contents. It is a book about cults. Furthermore, it is a short book about cults. But what exactly does a short book about cults give to the reader? Perhaps the following "not this, but that" and "does not, does" type statements will be helpful.

The Concise Book of Cults is exactly what the title implies, that is, a succinct treatment of cults. It *is not* a comprehensive introduction to or overview of cults. The reader can consult selected works from the included annotated bibliography for a more complete study on the cults. The selected groups described here will serve as examples of various categories of cults: one that has increasingly moved into the mainstream of society, one that generates significant disagreement as to whether it is actually a cult, another which is aggressively proselytizing, etc. Furthermore, the reader will note that the descriptions are quite brief. The goal here is not to provide a comprehensive overview of the selected groups, but to provide just enough information for the reader to get a sense of how significantly these groups might or might not diverge from historical Christianity.

This book *is not* concerned with non-Christian cults. It *is* about cults that have emerged out of, or in relation to, the Christian religion. Furthermore, it *does not* attempt to deal with every existing Christian cult. *The Concise Book of Cults does* introduce selected Christian cults from the last two centuries.

This book *is not* an academic study of cults. The reader can find in the book's annotated bibliography such academic studies. It *is* intended to

provide to the interested Christian an easily accessible overview of selected groups along with counsel about how to approach them with the gospel.

This book *is not* a call to any manner of hate-filled responses. However, recognizing that essential differences do exist between the doctrines and practices of historical Christianity and the cults, *The Concise Book of Cults is* written with the passionate desire that all will know the truth that sets free. Thus, this book *does not* provide an indifferent and disinterested evaluation of cults. Unapologetically, it *does* seek to evaluate the cults from an historical Christian perspective, and it does so with the goal that the gospel is endorsed and promoted and that people are invited to receive it.

This book *does not* attempt to examine aspects of behavior and practice except in those cases in which such behavior and practice necessarily are products of doctrine. The book *does* focus on the doctrinal differences between the selected groups and historical Christianity. It is fashionable today to repudiate studies that draw clear doctrinal lines between faith groups, yet the fact remains that Christianity, as represented in the historical creeds and confessions, differs significantly, even fundamentally and essentially, with many cults.

We live in an age of many religions and belief systems. In the midst of this diversity, as those who hope in the gospel, may we hear with a sense of urgency Peter's instruction: "Always be ready to give a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you" (1 Peter 3:15).[1]

- George Martin

Chapter 1

What are some basic questions I should ask?

Religion. It's global. It's all around us. It's in every culture. Anywhere you might travel, you will discover people who are religious. Innately, human beings seem to understand that there is something or someone more ultimate than themselves. Created by God, we naturally reach out to him, though our reach is off target. We ourselves become creators, that is, creators of our own religions and traditions.

This little book is concerned with a particular category of religious groups, those called cults. But what is "religion?" And what is a "cult?"

What is religion? What is a cult?

Before considering a definition of "cult," let's ask, *What is "religion"?* Providing an answer to that question perhaps is more difficult than imagined. In fact, some will say that the term cannot be defined. Religions are so varied, it is said, that a one-size-fits-all, essential definition cannot be found. Hence, Terry Muck has observed that once you declare, "Religion is A," you are likely to discover a religion that is not A.[2]

For example, one might assert, "Religion is the belief in a transcendent god."[3] But what does one do when we he encounters Theravada Buddhism? In this form of Buddhism, there is no appeal to divinity, transcendent or otherwise. Rather than belief in a supernatural being, here is "the strictest sort of humanism in religion."[4] In this case, religion was defined by asserting an essential doctrine, only to discover a religion that does not embrace that doctrine.

Lesslie Newbigin has acknowledged that “the word ‘religion’ is a notoriously difficult one. . . . [it can become] too vague to be useful.”[5] However, the prevalence of religion is so significant that it seems prudent to seek some sort of understanding of the term, whether or not a final, all-

comprehensive definition can be obtained.

Rather than seeking an essential definition, Terry Muck finds it helpful to define religion by function. That is, religion is that which functions by answering four questions: 1) What is ideal? 2) What has gone wrong? 3) What will put things right? 4) How shall we then live?[6]

What is ideal? Typically, the answer to this question concerns a state of existence or a place. Christianity teaches that the Garden of Eden, at the beginning, was perfect. A future heaven will be perfect. A perfect earth will one day exist. Other religious traditions have their ideals. But always, it seems, this ideal is something we do not have. Perfection once existed, or it will exist one day in the future, but at the present it cannot be found.

What has gone wrong? The Christian answers that sin has happened and has ruptured our relationship with our Creator. The goal then becomes the restoration of this relationship. Chinese religions typically emphasize the lack of order and the existence of disharmony. The goal is to restore a proper order and harmony. Other religions consider ignorance, not sin, to be the problem; we are looking at the world in a deluded sort of way. The goal then becomes enlightenment.

What will put things right? All religions say, "You have to do something." Religions are in no way neutral. They call us to action. The Christian gospel summons us to believe and to repent. Islam demands submission to the will of Allah as expressed in the Qur'an. Hinduism expects an individual to follow the *dharma*, or rules of the caste.

How shall we then live? All say that in order to take full advantage of what the particular religion offers, there is a certain way we must continue to act, think, and relate to people and things. And so, those who accept the teachings of a particular religion find themselves living in a particular way, which is stipulated by the religion.

Our concern here is not with the major world religions.[7] Rather, we are endeavoring to understand that phenomenon we call "cults," and in particular, "Christian cults." One might tend to think of a cult as sort of a subset of religion. That is, there are major world religions that function in the above specified ways, and then there are cults or sects or alternative religions, which in some manner are less (such as smaller in size or with a diminished and compromised doctrine) than the religions out of which they emerge.

But what is a cult, really? Let's think about this matter of definition.[8] People often equate "cult" with minority religions, but the two are not

necessarily synonymous, especially if by "minority religion," we simply mean that a cult is small in size. That is, we do not distinguish a cult simply by noting that it has few members.

Perhaps dissent and the desire to reform and purify a dominant religious tradition are the characteristic features of a cult? The Puritans were dissenters. They opposed the established church in England, arguing that whatever reformation had taken place, it had not gone far enough. Few evangelicals, though, would think of the Puritans as a cult. Purifiers? Yes. Reformers? Yes. Committed and passionate? Yes. But a cult in the same category as contemporary Christian cults? No.

Might a cult be identified as a group that has perverted or distorted the dominant religion from which it emerged? Of course, here one gets into a beauty-is-in-the-eye-of-the-beholder sort of argument.[9] For instance, the position of Judaism was that Christianity constituted a cult because it perverted Judaism. Similarly, sixteenth century Roman Catholicism would have argued that the Protestant Reformers were establishing a cult when they perverted the teachings of Rome.

Maybe a cult is a group that is openly heretical and in error? If so, how serious must be the error? Or could it be that a Christian cult is simply Christianity out of whack or out of balance? Does an overly strong emphasis on the sovereignty of God or, on the other hand, too great a stress on human responsibility make for a cult? Might we speak of the "cult of consumerism?" In twenty-first century America, the pursuit of material wealth and goods, even by professing Christians, has certainly resulted in an unhealthy balance. However, one might hesitate to identify as a cultist a professing Christian who lives in a very nice house in a gated community, drives two or three luxury cars, enjoys extended and exotic vacations, and so forth. Instead, we're likely to recommend to that person that he or she prioritize the things of God's kingdom over the material things of this world.

So, what is a cult? A quick perusal of the literature on cults will generate quite a few definitions, most of them identifying similar components, yet not fully in agreement.[10] Rather than establishing an essential definition, we will note several key elements that are often, though not always, found in a cult, that are often identified in the literature, and that will be useful for our present discussion: 1) small numbers of adherents, 2) unorthodox teaching, 3) the presence of a strong authority figure, 4) strong internal conformity to the teachings of the authority figure, 5) a high level of

commitment on the part of cult members, and 6) a strong focus on personal needs and concerns of the followers.

Matt Slick has offered as characteristics of a Christian cult: 1) they err on one or more of the essential doctrines of Christianity; 2) they often add to Christian doctrine and Scripture – Mormons have the *Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants*, and *The Pearl of Great Price*; Christian Science has *Science and Health*; Scientology has *Dianetics*, and so on; 3) they place emphasis on earning salvation through their own efforts and add those efforts to the finished work of Jesus; and 4) they misuse Scripture.[11]

Today, less and less is the term "cult" used in academic writing because of the perceived pejorative nature of the word. In a 2006 editorial, *Christianity Today* noted: "the word *cult* is a problem. For better or worse, it has shifted in meaning and has become associated with bizarre groups . . . no matter how many qualifications are made."[12]

Other, more preferred terms today are: new religious movements, alternative religions, minority religions. However, each has its own strengths and weaknesses. The term "cult" is used in this work with an emphasis on the unorthodox teaching of the group. When a new group significantly diverges from the essential, foundational beliefs of an established group, from the perspective of the larger group, the emergent group is a cult.

Though the excitement and novel nature of a cult can provide strong incentives for individuals to join the group, cults have mixed records when it comes to retaining members. Like any established group, for a cult to prosper, it must exercise sufficient authority over its followers and provide the same with sufficient incentives – spiritual, emotional, psychological, intellectual, financial, etc. – to remain in the group. Some are more successful than others at the retention of group members.

Why should I study cults?

Why should we study cults? No single answer to this question exists. Rather, an assortment of answers typically is given. *We must study the cults in order to understand the world as it actually is.* The cults are here. As evangelical Christians, we cannot wish them away. We need to understand them. *We must study the cults because they alter biblical teaching*, often by redefining terms. In the Scriptures, we are commanded to stand against

untruth and to contend for the faith. *We must study the cults because they recruit from our churches and families.* There is danger here, and we must understand that danger in order to confront it effectively. *We study the cults because their followers need the gospel*. To understand the cults is to be better equipped to engage them with the gospel. *We study the cults because understanding the attraction of cults will help us evaluate our own churches.* People are drawn to the cults because of the perception that they are able to meet personal needs, needs that seemingly are not being met in our churches. We must address our own failures and become salt and light in our own culture, while meeting real needs and providing hope.

What is the attraction of cults?

Human history is replete with stories of the establishment of new religious groups. Typically, when we think about a cult, we are looking at a group or a movement that is relatively new, though that is not always the case. A question arises. Why do new movements start up? And, especially, what is the attraction of new groups and their teachings even when they face strong opposition from established groups? Even though it's not a cult, let's first take a look at the new religion, from two thousand years ago, called Christianity.

Historical Christianity steadfastly affirms the supernatural origins and nature of Christianity and the church. God himself has given the good news of the gospel, and though the church was established and grew in a particular historical and cultural context that influenced it, ultimately it was God who established his church. The church is unique and is not to be equated with any other group. Nevertheless, it will be helpful to ask, "What were the initial factors facilitating and encouraging the establishment and growth of Christianity?" And, "Can these factors contribute to our understanding of how new religious groups are formed in our own day?" Let's see.

In the beginning, in its largely Jewish context, Christianity was a new religious movement and very much suspect in the estimation of the established religion. A quick perusal of the New Testament provides insight into the factors that contributed to the beginning and the growth of the church, factors that often come into play whenever new movements begin.

Judaism, a*s the established religion, had lost much of its energy*. It

had become formalistic, legalistic, and elitist, a reality that is reflected in Jesus' pronouncement against the Jewish religious leaders: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! You pay a tenth of mint, dill, and cumin, yet you have neglected the more important matters of the law-justice, mercy, and faith. These things should have been done without neglecting the others. Blind guides! You strain out a gnat, yet gulp down a camel! Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence!" (Matthew 23:23-24). The religious leaders sought to maintain the status quo, but the people were desperate for relevant teaching that met their real needs.

In the midst of so many dry formalisms and deadly legalisms, *new, powerful, charismatic voices emerged*. A man was brought to Jesus, who was possessed by a demon, blind, and unable to speak. When Jesus healed the man, "all the crowds were astounded and said, 'Perhaps this is the Son of David!'" (Matthew 12:23). Not only were the people amazed at the things Jesus did, the people were impressed by his teaching: "When Jesus had finished this sermon, the crowds were astonished at His teaching, because He was teaching them like one who had authority, and not like their scribes" (Matthew 7:28-29). Luke tells us that Jesus "was teaching in their synagogues, being acclaimed by everyone" (Luke 4:15; also see Luke 21:37-38; 23:25). When Jesus spoke, people listened.

Not only Jesus, but also his disciples spoke in such a way that they could not be ignored. Though "uneducated and untrained men," when Peter and John spoke with boldness, the people
"were amazed and knew that they had been with Jesus" (Acts 4:13). Threatened by the authorities, the disciples prayed, and "they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak God's message with boldness" (Acts 4:31). At the end of his ministry, in Rome, Paul, even from a jail cell, was still "proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching the things concerning the Lord Jesus Christ with full boldness and without hindrance" (Acts 28:31). These were new and commanding voices, which would not go unnoticed.

People had needs, needs that were not being met by the prevailing religion. The people were sick, but the established religion offered no healing. Satanic oppression destroyed lives, but the dominant religion provided no deliverance. Jesus, on the other hand, "was going all over Galilee . . . healing every disease and sickness among the people. Then the news about Him spread throughout Syria. So they brought to Him all those

who were afflicted, those suffering from various diseases and intense pains, the demon-possessed, the epileptics, and the paralytics. And He healed them. Large crowds followed Him from Galilee, Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and beyond the Jordan" (Matthew 4:23-25; also see Matthew 12:14-15; 20:30-34; John 6:2).

New converts were drawn to the new teachings when the people *perceived the purity of the lives of the disciples.* The New Testament writers understood this principle. Paul commended "the sound teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ" and "the teaching that promotes godliness," recognizing that "godliness with contentment is great gain" (1 Timothy 6:3-6). Paul instructed Titus "to deny godlessness and worldly lusts and to live in a sensible, righteous, and godly way in the present age" (Titus 2:12).

Peter strongly counseled, "I urge you as aliens and temporary residents to abstain from fleshly desires that war against you. Conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentiles, so that in a case where they speak against you as those who do evil, they may, by observing your good works, glorify God in a day of visitation" (1 Peter 2:11-12). And so it was, as the early believers lived their lives, others took notice and were drawn to them and their teaching. The second and third century Christian writer, Tertullian, wrote that the Christians lived lives of such great love that others confessed in astonishment, "See how they love one another!"[13]

Converts were drawn, not only by the individual lives of the early believers, but also *to the religious life of the community.* The early church was seen gathering together regularly for fellowship and worship. The communities in which the believers lived would also have noted that the early Christians cared for and looked out for one another, even to the extent that they "sold their possessions and property and distributed the proceeds to all, as anyone had a need. These early Christians even "ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And every day the Lord added to them those who were being saved" (Acts 2:42-47). How could non-Christians not be attracted to this new way of life?

Contrary to what might be expected, even *opposition and persecution contributed to the establishment and flowering of the early church.* With great boldness, Stephen preached the gospel. His listeners, so enraged by his message, killed him (Acts 7). At Stephen's death, Luke reports: "Saul agreed with putting him to death. On that day a severe persecution broke out against

the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout the land of Judea and Samaria. . . . So those who were scattered went on their way preaching the message of good news" (Acts 8:1-4). The book of Acts and the New Testament epistles tell the story of the continued strengthening and growth of the church. In the face of persecution, Peter encourages his readers, "if [anyone suffers] as a Christian, he should not be ashamed, but should glorify God with that name" (1 Peter 4:16). The early Christians understood that suffering and persecution sometimes promote strength and growth, nourishing the church rather than diminishing it.

It might seem odd to note, but the first-century *context of pluralism seemed to encourage the emergence of new ideas and groups*, a development from which the early church seems to have benefitted. In relating the story of Paul's preaching in Athens, Luke notes that the people there liked nothing more than to search out new things and new ideas (Acts 17:21). This mindset provided an opening for Paul, and he took it.

We live in a culture that is increasingly multi-ethnic and pluralistic. One word that well characterizes the present context is "spirituality." A quick internet search for *spirituality in America* generates the following:

> "The Spiritual Revolution . . . So many sources of wisdom! So many ways to a richer, deeper life!"[14]
>
> "Survey: More have dropped dogma for spirituality in U.S. . . . Religion today in the USA is a salad bar where people heap on upbeat beliefs they like and often leave the veggies — like strict doctrines — behind."[15]
>
> "How Spiritual Are We? Surprising results from an exclusive PARADE poll . . . America is generally thought to be among the most religious nations in the Western world. . . . What Americans are doing today is separating spirituality from religion."[16]
>
> "Spirituality in America: For Many, A Life of Losing Religion"[17]

Losing religion, but gaining spirituality. It's a new day. In the small central Florida town in which my grandparents lived, they had two choices when it came to religion: the Baptist church and the Methodist church.

Think about it. Until recently, religion, always and in every place, was largely determined by birth. Strong expectations were always in place. Often, no options were even possible. Religious pluralism seems a uniquely modern phenomenon. And those around us are availing themselves of the options at an amazing pace. Traditional religion and dogma are out. Spirituality, whatever type suits you, is in. People can easily find whatever flavor of spirituality they desire, and they are looking!

Lost energy, new voices, needs met, attractive lives, community, opposition and persecution, and pluralism . . . the factors that drew so many to early Christianity, and which often are missing in contemporary expressions of Christianity, can be found, to some degree, in contemporary groups that are attracting new converts.

In the next section, we will consider how we should evaluate cults. What sort of questions should we ask? How should we deal with them? But another important question that we might first ask is, "How are WE doing?" That is, have our churches grown stale and irrelevant? Are we seeing needs and meeting them? When people see our lives, are they drawn to the gospel? Are our churches genuine families composed of members who look out for one another? Are we facing opposition? If not, is that because we have offered nothing to which the world might be opposed? If so, how are we responding to that opposition? Are we taking advantage of the many opportunities presented to us in order to share the good news of the gospel?

A troubling thought comes to mind. Maybe the cults are attractive to people because we are not. Before evaluating the cults, we would do well to ask these questions of ourselves!

How should I evaluate cults?

"Evaluate? Don't you mean criticize or condemn?" some might ask. We live in an increasingly pluralistic society in North America. And one might legitimately debate whether or not the increasing cultural pluralism is a good thing. On the one hand, it seems reasonable to argue, when new philosophies and worldviews clash with long-held, virtuous principles and threaten to overthrow them, such change is not a good thing. On the other hand, who has not enjoyed the wonderful foods created by some of our newest citizens from Central and South America or from Asia?

A dangerous tendency exists, however. Multiculturalism often flattens the playing field, with the resultant conclusion that all cultures, philosophies, or religious traditions are equally valid. The statement often attributed to G. K. Chesterton well characterizes the prevailing attitude in much of today's American society: “Tolerance is the virtue of the man without convictions.” The Christian cannot be without convictions, convictions that are foundational and which come into play when evaluating the cults.

But what are the "foundational" convictions? R. Albert Mohler offers helpful guidance. In a 2005 blog,[18] in an attempt to gauge how Christians of different denominations and teachings should relate to one another theologically, Mohler has suggested that Christian doctrine can be placed on three levels or tiers: Level one includes the non-negotiable doctrines of the faith, such as the truthfulness and authority of the Bible, the Trinitarian nature of God, the full deity and full humanity of Christ, the exclusivity of the gospel and the necessity of repentance and faith for salvation. Level two doctrines will significantly divide Christian groups and prevent close fellowship among them. These teachings include such matters as church polity and the mode of baptism. Christians can disagree on these matters, and at the same time, consider those with whom they disagree to be genuinely Christian. Level three doctrines include those over which Christians disagree and yet are able to continue in close fellowship. The issue of eschatology, for example, can be included as a level three issue.

Cults are typically identified as such because they stray from the level one theological issues. Though these issues decide the matter, along with doctrinal matters come other teachings and practices which, though not fully disruptive, still seem odd and eccentric. Most importantly, however, a cult

has so modified or compromised one or more of the level one teachings of Christianity that it can no longer be considered to be in the stream of historical, orthodox Christianity.

And so, we ask, "What should we think about this or that religious group?" Taking into account Terry Muck's four functions of religion and Albert Mohler's level-one issues, one should ask the following questions.

What is the group's ideal? What is perceived as perfection? Here, for example, we can consider the doctrines of God, of man, of creation, and of heaven. The Psalmist declared, "For I know that Yahweh is great; our Lord is greater than all gods" (Psalm 135:5). Even the pagan king, Darius, recognized, "For He is the living God, and He endures forever; His kingdom will never be destroyed, and His dominion has no end" (Daniel 6:26). God has said of himself, "I am Yahweh, that is My name; I will not give My glory to another or My praise to idols" (Isaiah 42:8).

In short, there is one God, the God of the Bible, who has created all things, including human beings, who are not pre-existent or incomplete or unformed gods, but are created by God in his image. All of us descend from our first parents, Adam and Eve. This creator God is moving history toward the climax of his choosing, with his rule extending over all. What is a group's position on these matters? To promote teachings that are in opposition to these foundational truths is to place one's self outside historical, orthodox Christianity.

What has gone wrong? The Bible tells us that sin has come into the world and ruined everything. The terrible predicament we find ourselves in is not due merely to ignorance, it is not due to our failure to realize the sleeping god within, nor is it due to anything else but sin. What is believed and taught concerning the matter of sin? To promote teachings on these matters, which are in opposition to historical Christianity, is to place one's self outside historical, orthodox Christianity.

What will make things right? Here we are talking about the doctrine of salvation. Mark Seifrid has observed: "No article of any confession compares in significance with that concerning salvation. The whole of theology is bound up with it: our understanding God, the world and our very selves. The manner in which we understand salvation decides and reveals the way in which we think about God, and vice versa."[19]

We believe the gospel makes things right, that we are justified through Jesus Christ's atoning work, and that repentance and faith are

necessary for appropriating salvation. No other message is sufficient for the saving of our souls. Does the group change this gospel or add to it? To promote teachings on these matters, which are in opposition to historical Christianity, is to place one's self outside historical, orthodox Christianity.

How should we then live? "According to the Word of God!" the Christian answers. The cultist, on the other hand, will often appeal to the charismatic leader who ultimately determines how his followers are to live. Or followers will be directed to extra-biblical sources of authority that ultimately trump the Bible itself. To acknowledge an authority more ultimate than the revealed Scriptures found in the Old and New Testaments is to place one's self outside historical, orthodox Christianity.

Of course, unorthodox level one doctrine is only one of several typical characteristics of a cult, but it is certainly a critical and determining factor. Each of the groups considered offer strong leaders, internal conformity to the teachings of that figure, a high level of commitment on the part of members, and a strong focus on personal needs and fulfillment of individual members. And though any number of other considerations might be taken into account, the following material will highlight matters of disagreement over fundamental doctrinal issues.

Doctrinal issues are not the only matters one must be concerned about. How, and under what circumstances was the group founded? What is its history (key people, events)? What are its demographics? What is its present situation? These are important matters for understanding a particular group. One must not be concerned, however, only with understanding. The gospel mandate is always present. We seek to understand others in order to meet them and bring them to the Savior.

Chapter 2

Are there any groups I might want to know about?

One recent book in a series on religion in America provides a glossary of fifty controversial groups and religions. Another series offers four significant volumes on new religious movements in America. Any number of encyclopedic treatments of cults and new religious movements in America can be discovered on the shelves of today's bookstores and online. Many of these works can be perused fruitfully as one seeks to understand and respond to cults.

The following material presents brief introductions and overviews of only eight groups, four from the nineteenth century and four from the twentieth century. These are some of the better known new religious groups in America and will serve well to introduce the reader to some of the types of issues that accompany the study of and response to cults.

The Mormons or The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints

-- Does success equal legitimacy? --

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, or the Mormons (sometimes "LDS"), presents a bit of a challenge. On the one hand, certain LDS teachings are clearly inconsistent with essential doctrines of historical Christianity. And so, as evangelical Christians, it is easy to include Mormonism in our list of cults. On the other hand, the U.S. and international populations of Mormons have grown substantially, and this group, once far out on the periphery of American society, is now considered a legitimate major Christian denomination by many.[20] The LDS church can count among its accomplishments a respected national newspaper, a presidential candidate, and well received U.S. senators.

Some might argue, because of its size and influence and its growing

acceptance into the mainstream of American society, Mormonism could be left off our list. Does Mormonism's success, on the levels just noted, demand its acceptance as a legitimate Christian denomination? Let's take a look.

History and Current Demographics

The two great persons in early Mormonism, Joseph Smith and Brigham Young, were born in Vermont within five years of each other, respectively, in 1805 and 1801. Smith's family, because of various difficulties, moved from Vermont to New Hampshire to New York. According to Smith's testimony, [21] he became quite concerned about the different teachings of Christian groups, and while in the woods one day, he saw a vision of light, which was followed by visions of God and Jesus. Warned that the denominations of the day were not teaching right doctrine, and assured that his own sins were forgiven, he was prohibited from joining the existing churches or denominations.

In his later teenage years, Smith received a second vision, this time of the angel Moroni, who told him about a hidden golden book that taught the truth of the gospel. Smith also learned how the book came to America with a people who traveled to the continent centuries earlier. The stories about Smith provide much detail, but in short, the book was hidden away until four years later. Having married his new wife, Emma, whom he met while traveling in Pennsylvania, and with the newly retrieved book in hand, Smith moved to Harmony, Pennsylvania. There, in 1829, though enduring significant trials, and with the help of Oliver Cowdery, Smith completed the translation of what came to be known as "The Book of Mormon."

Smith and Cowdery, one day praying, were visited by John the Baptist and received the priesthood of Aaron. They ordained one another as the first elders in the "Church of Christ" that was being restored. As missionaries of the new church moved westward, they took the new faith to the Indians and to Ohio, where Smith received additional visions. Brigham Young, a Methodist, moved into the area and, in 1832, was baptized into the Mormon faith along with others. Smith also began work on a new translation of the Bible, which would come to be considered as authoritative.

Faced with increasing hostility, the migration of the growing movement continued into the Midwestern states, with stops in Illinois and

Missouri. In Illinois, Smith and Young built, on the bank of the Mississippi River, the town of Nauvoo, where Smith announced new teachings. Accused of participating in an uprising, Smith and his brother were placed in jail and, on June 27, 1844, they were killed by a mob.

A struggle for leadership ensued, and the great westward migration continued. With some remaining in Illinois and Missouri, in 1846, Brigham Young took a group to the valley of the Great Salt Lake, where a new settlement was established. Young ascended to the presidency of the church and led his followers to build Salt Lake City and a new temple.

More and more Mormons moved westward to the Salt Lake Valley, and in 1850, the area became a U.S. territory. Meanwhile, some refused to accept Young's leadership, remained in the Midwestern states, and established the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. Other splinter groups formed, and the following years in the west brought tensions between the Mormons and the U.S. government, even as Mormon missionaries expanded their communities throughout the western territories.

The followers of Brigham Young struggled with polygamy and property issues. In 1890, the federal government outlawed the practice of polygamy, and Utah was established as the 45th state in 1896. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints continued to grow, reaching a reported membership of one million in 1947.[22]

At the end of 2012, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints boasted a worldwide membership of almost 15 million, with approximately nine million of those in North America.[23] Splinter groups, some practicing polygamy, probably add another 500,000 individuals to the larger Mormon family.

Key Doctrinal Issues

Mormons recognize four books as authoritative: the Holy Bible, the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, and the Pearl of Great Price. With the inclusion of these books, alongside the Bible, as authoritative, the LDS is very much out of step with the testimony of the Bible itself and with the great historical confessions of the Christian faith. The Articles of Faith specifically state: "We believe the Bible to be the word of God, as far as it is translated correctly; We also believe the Book of Mormon to be the word of

God."[24]

James E. Talmage, an apostle of the church and enlisted by its leadership to lecture and write on the Articles of Faith, argued, "It is at once unreasonable, and directly contrary to our conception of the unchangeable justice of God, to believe that He will bless the Church in one dispensation with a present living revelation of His will, and in another leave the Church, to which He gives His name, to live as best it may according to the laws of a by-gone age."[25] The door is opened to continuing, authoritative revelations from God.

Article 1 of The Articles of Faith affirms: "We believe in God, the Eternal Father, and in His Son, Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Ghost." Joseph's Smith's teaching is not absolutely clear regarding the doctrine of God. However, whereas historical Christianity affirms the eternal Trinity – three persons in one Godhead – the doctrine of God as found in Mormonism is quite different: "The Father existed prior to the Son and the Holy Ghost and is the source of their divinity. . . . The Son and the Holy Spirit were 'in the beginning, with God,' but the Father alone existed before the beginning of the universe as it is known."[26] Both Father and Son have bodies of flesh and bone. Furthermore, though God once was as we are now, he is now exalted. In the same manner, we can become as he is, that is, we can become gods.

The ancient church, through various councils, affirmed the uniqueness of Jesus as the eternal Son of God, with two natures, divine and human, united in one person (see the AD 451 Chalcedonian Creed). Mormons, however, teach that Jesus is the firstborn spirit child of the Father. He is one of us, though already exalted.

As pre-existent souls, by Jesus and through obedience and morality, individuals can be exalted to divinity. The atonement of Jesus actually produces two levels of salvation, first a general salvation and second, an individual salvation. All people participate in the first and are assured of life in the telestial heaven. Good people, though blinded and not Mormon, will live in the terrestrial heaven. Those Mormons who faithfully follow the path laid out in the teachings of the LDS Church will inhabit the celestial heaven, where additional distinctions are made relative to the degree of faithfulness exercised in this life.

Other differences between Mormon teaching and historical Christianity can be found. Among them is the belief that non-Mormons can be exalted or saved through prayers for the dead, thus, the emphasis on

family genealogies.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints considers itself the one, true church that has been restored and is now spreading throughout the world. Along the way, it has faced its own challenges, among them alleged discrepancies in its scriptures, tensions with the U.S. government over polygamy, retracted pronouncements regarding race issues, and so on. A quick glance, however, is sufficient to show that the teachings of the LDS Church place it significantly at odds with historical Christianity.

Seventh Day Adventists

-- Is it, or is it not? That is the question. --

With so many essential doctrinal differences between Mormonism and historical Christianity, it is easy to see Mormonism as a significant departure from historical Christianity. For evangelicals, that conclusion is easily reached in spite of the increasing acceptance of Mormonism by the larger American society.

Seventh Day Adventism (often "SDA") presents a different sort of challenge. Like the LDS Church, it finds its roots in nineteenth century America, it has experienced significant growth in recent decades, and it now seems a common fixture in American society. Unlike Mormonism, however, significant disagreement exists on whether or not Seventh Day Adventism differs essentially from historical Christianity in doctrine and can rightly be called a cult.[27] Is SDA a cult, or is it not? We'll take a look, but first, a bit of history.

History and Current Demographics

William Miller (1782-1849), a New England Baptist, was a largely self-educated itinerant preacher with an intense interest in Old Testament prophecy. Based on his study of Daniel's 70 weeks (Daniel 9), he predicted the return, or advent, of Jesus in 1843, eventually extending his prediction to 1844. When the following year also failed to see Jesus' return – characterized as the Great Disappointment – Miller acknowledged his error. Hiram Edson, one of the expectant followers of Miller, eventually claimed a vision in which

he came to understand that Jesus was not returning to earth, but to the heavenly sanctuary from which he would begin the final work of redemption.

In the early years, two other distinctives began to emerge. Consistent with Miller's interest in prophecy, a "spirit of prophecy" came to characterize the movement, especially as it came to be manifested in Ellen G. White. The other distinctive has been the seventh day Sabbath observance. It is asserted that the seventh day of the week is the appropriate day for corporate worship of God and that this is a "perpetual sign of the everlasting covenant between God and His people."[28]

The Sabbath doctrine was particularly promoted by Ellen G. White (1827-1915), who as a teenager in the Methodist church heard William Miller and soon began to have visions, around which a significant movement grew. Based on these visions, White published instructions regarding health, dietary matters, sexual issues, women, and various other matters of Christian living. With her husband, White moved from New York to Battle Creek, Michigan in 1855, where numerous conferences were held. In 1863, the movement formally organized into a church.

Visions continued to come to White, and along with her husband, she promoted the work of the newly formed General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists as far west as California. Also making made trips to Europe and to Australia, she continued to speak, write, and publish. The writings of Ellen White are not claimed by Adventists to be equal with the Bible. However, her writings are understood to possess authority and to underscore the necessity of continued revelation in the life of the church. From the SDA's *Fundamental Beliefs*: "One of the gifts of the Holy Spirit is prophecy. This gift is an identifying mark of the remnant church and was manifested in the ministry of Ellen G. White. As the Lord's messenger, her writings are a continuing and authoritative source of truth which provide for the church comfort, guidance, instruction, and correction. They also make clear that the Bible is the standard by which all teaching and experience must be tested." [29]

Many of the historical features of Seventh Day Adventism remain in place today. Seen by many as overly legalistic, and concerned about alleged misuse of prophecy, Seventh Day Adventism has been quite isolated from Christian groups throughout its history. However, with significant growth has come gradual acceptance. As of June 30, 2012, a worldwide membership of 17,592,397 was reported, with most of those members being outside North

America (only 1.14 million in North America).[30] Seventh Day Adventists are known for their missions zeal and emphasis on humanitarian ministries, including the building of hospitals in many underdeveloped countries around the world.

Key Doctrinal Issues

A quick perusal of the Seventh Day Adventist document *Fundamental Beliefs* will clarify why there has been so much disagreement as to whether or not Adventists should be included among the cults. Much of the statement of faith appears to be quite in line with historical Christian doctrine. But the differences with historical Christianity are those matters that are so troubling. Ruth Tucker reports that some early leaders promoted teachings that rejected the full deity of Christ and present, also, was a current of pantheism.[31] Even if the current articles of faith do not reflect these early trends, other areas of concern exist.

Among the troubling areas are the insistence on Sabbath worship as a perpetual sign of our redemption; authority issues, particularly the exaltation of Ellen G. White and her writings; and teachings on the afterlife and eschatology. Creating the most concern is the doctrine of "Investigative Judgment," which appears to picture the work of Jesus' atoning work on the cross as unfinished.

The jury seems still to be out on Seventh Day Adventism. In many aspects, the *Fundamental Beliefs* document is in agreement with historical Christianity. However, a number of cult-like traits, identified earlier in respect to cults in general, are evident, particularly the emphasis on prophecy, continued revelation, the exaltation of one person to authoritarian status, and the additions to the work of Jesus.

Jehovah's Witnesses

-- You're going to get a visit! --

Sooner or later, you ARE going to get a visit from Jehovah's Witnesses. Count on it. Imagine that you hear the knock on your front door only to realize, after opening the door, they are standing there on your front

porch. Now, you have a decision to make. Will you talk with them or not? Hopefully, you will, and you will share the good news of the gospel with them. But before you talk, it would be good to know some things about the two people on your front porch.

History and Current Demographics

The founder, Charles Taze Russell (1852-1916), whose family was Presbyterian, joined a
Congregational Church at age 15. Becoming agnostic soon thereafter, he regained his faith, and in 1872, founded the International Bible Students Association in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. This association was the forerunner of the Jehovah's Witnesses movement.

Influenced by the Adventists of his time and their stress on prophecy, Russell expected the year 1874 to bring the return of Christ. When Christ did not return, Russell taught that a spiritual advent of Christ had taken place, and that he would return physically in 1914. With the publication of *Zion's Watch Tower* and a series of books in the late 19th century – *Studies in the Scriptures* – Russell's influence grew. In the 1880s, Zion's Watch Tower Tract Society was founded and incorporated, the "Zion's" ultimately being dropped from the name. With the year 1914 passing without the return of Christ, and with numerous public crises beleaguering him, Russell's reputation took a sizeable hit. He died in 1916.

A new leader, Joseph F. Rutherford, followed and declared himself to be the mouthpiece of God in this age. During Rutherford's increasingly powerful administration, numerous trends and episodes emerged, among them increased direct and personal proselytism and tension with the federal government over military service. Facing growing public hostility, under the next president, Nathan Homer Knorr (1905-1977), the printing and distribution of literature was increased, including *The New World Translation* of the New Testament in 1950, with the full Bible following in succeeding years. During this time, significant growth took place.

The official website reports the following current global statistics: 111,719 congregations with 19,000,000 people who attend meetings or conventions.[32] Since Knorr's administration, the group has seen a number of significant new directions in governing structure, but it's not the

governance of the group that most interests us. Rather, the great concern is with its theology.

Key Doctrinal Issues

A brief listing of key Jehovah's Witnesses theological teachings will suffice to demonstrate how far removed from historical Christian teaching is the theology of this group. One solitary being, Jehovah God, has created and preserves all things. Among the created is the Word, or Logos, who was made human as the man Jesus Christ. Let us allow the Witnesses to speak for themselves concerning Jesus as the Son of God: "God created Jesus before he created Adam. Regarding Jesus, the apostle Paul wrote: 'He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. . . . As God's firstborn Son, Jesus was a spirit creature in heaven before he was born as a human on earth.'"[33]

All people are born as sinners, after the likeness of Adam. Jesus' death removed the effects of Adam's sin, and now those who faithfully obey God will inherit the Kingdom of God, while all others will be annihilated. Actually, two classes of people will be received by God: the 144,000 of the "Anointed Class," who will possess a heavenly kingdom, and the "Earthly Class," who will dwell on the renewed earth.

The Jehovah's Witnesses go against the grain of historical Christianity in many ways. They are Anti-Trinitarian (Jesus as a created being), annihilationist (hell does not exist), and they view themselves as the present, legitimate expression of God's people. Additionally, historical Christianity will have many other concerns about Jehovah's Witnesses, among them the prohibition of blood transfusions, unfulfilled prophecies, and such – but the critical errors regarding essential doctrines clearly put this movement outside the parameters of historical Christianity.

Christian Science

-- What goes around, comes around --

The nineteenth century was a time of social and intellectual foment, and thus, a fertile seedbed for the founding of new religious movements in

America. Among the prominent movements founded in the eighteenth century, and which exist to this day, are the Christian Scientists.

Mary Baker Eddy, the prophet of Christian Science, traveled paths seemingly new, but which, in reality, were old, discredited paths from the past. In certain ways, her teachings represent a repackaging of the Gnostic dualism that so troubled the early church. What goes around, comes around.

History and Current Demographics

The founder was Mary Morse Baker (1821-1910). Growing up in a Congregational church, she suffered from poor health as a young adult. Helped by a healer in Maine, Phineas Quimby, she was influenced by him. After Quimby's death, and after a fall on icy pavement in 1866, she claimed that principles of healing were revealed to her. A significant influence was her reading and contemplation of the story, in Matthew 9:2-8, of the paralytic who was lowered before Jesus by his friends and commanded by Jesus to take up his bed and walk.

In 1877, after two previous marriages, Mary Baker married Asa Gilbert Eddy, who assisted her in organizing a Sunday school class and promoting her writing. Her most important writing is *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures*. After preaching at a Baptist church in Boston and finding little acceptance, she and her followers, in 1879, formed The Church of Christ, Scientist.

Mary Baker Eddy believed that she had discovered, in the Scriptures, the principles that enabled Jesus to heal and that the same healings could continue to take place. Until her death in 1910, Eddy was a prodigious writer, and her writings provide the key to understanding her movement. Though claiming the Bible as her ultimate authority, her followers have come to view *Science and Health* as divine revelation. In fact, Christian Science church buildings typically have two lecterns: one for teaching from the Bible and the other for teaching from S*cience and Health*.

Regarding those church buildings, the Christian Science website explains, "The Church of Christ, Scientist, includes branch Churches of Christ, Scientist, as well as smaller organizations called Christian Science Societies. They’re all branches of The Mother Church, The First Church of Christ, Scientist, in Boston, Massachusetts, USA, and can be found in about

75 countries worldwide."[34]

The Christian Post, in June 2012, reported, "The number of Christian Science churches in the U.S. has been gradually decreasing over the last few decades, dropping from 1,829 U.S. churches in 1971 to only 911 in 2009." [35]

Key Doctrinal Issues

For many years, I thought of Christian Science as nothing much more than positive thinking. My thinking was based upon a brief encounter with a fellow college student in the 1970s, who was a practicing Christian Scientist. Obviously sick with a high fever and cough, I remember this fellow walking around exclaiming to himself, "I am not sick. I am not sick. I am not sick." It appeared to me as if he was simply trying to convince himself, through the power of positive thinking, that he was not sick. There is much more to Mary Baker Eddy's teaching than that, however.

Key to grasping Eddy's teaching about health is the understanding that God does not wish for any of us to be sick, and that sickness is an illusion, a dualism of sorts in which matter is set against spirit. The only reality is mind, and once a person understands that sickness is not real, the person gains control over the supposed sickness and can banish it. Not only in regard to the dualism represented in this teaching, but in regard to just about everything else, Christian Science hardly resembles historic Christianity.

God is not so much a person as an impersonal power (mind, spirit, influence). Jesus came into the world, not to make atonement for his people's sins, but to destroy the belief of sin, which is mere illusion. Jesus is not God, though he, as well as anyone else, represents the true idea of God. The Holy Spirit is not a person, but the divine idea that leads us to truth. When one is rescued from the illusions that bind and deceive, then one experiences salvation. Indeed, hardly any resemblance to historical Christianity at all!

Church of Scientology

-- Not to be confused with Christian Science --

To the Stars, Typewriter in the Sky, Final Blackout, Ole Doc Methuselah . . . just a sampling of the prodigious science fiction writings of one of the great authors of what has come to be known as the golden age of science fiction writing during the mid-20th century. As well-known as L. Ron Hubbard is for his literary output, with current Hollywood efforts and a continuing presence in the nation's headlines, perhaps the Church of Scientology is destined to be Hubbard's biggest legacy.

Though profoundly out of step with historical Christianity, the story of L. Ron Hubbard and his Church of Scientology is absorbing. Be sure, though, that you do not confuse this group with Mary Baker Eddy's Christian Science, which we just reviewed.

History and Current Demographics

With many literary titles already to his credit (fiction and non-fiction), by the late 1930s, L. Ron Hubbard displayed his interest in the human spirit with several publications, culminating in the 1950 publication of *Dianetics: The Modern Science of Mental Health.* The book became the foundational text for what has come to be known as Scientology.

In 1940, Hubbard established the Hubbard Association of Scientologists International, and in 1954 he founded the Church of Scientology. Throughout the decade of the 50s, Hubbard advanced the ideas endorsed in *Dianetics*. He claimed to have discovered the secret for getting rid of unhealthy feelings and memories of negative experiences. As an aid in this process, he adapted an electro-galvanometer to create his Hubbard electrometer or E-meter. In a 1965 filing for a U.S. patent on the device, Hubbard explained that "the invention relates to resistance measuring or indicating devices and is concerned more especially, but not exclusively, with devices for indicating variations in the electrical resistance of the human body."[36] The device seems to have been not much more than a variation on the concept of a lie detector.

The Food and Drug Administration sought a judgment against the church with the argument that the E-meter was an unlawful device. This

legal battle continued for almost a decade, and in 1971 Hubbard prevailed and was granted permission to use the E-meter in his religious activities.

Both before and after Hubbard's death in 1986, Scientology seemingly has been embroiled in one high profile legal battle after another, though time and time again it has regrouped. Today, among its practitioners are a number of well-known celebrities.

Key Doctrinal Issues

From *scientology.org*: "Scientology is . . . a religion in the most traditional sense of the term. Scientology helps Man become more aware of his own spiritual nature and that of those around him, and, hence, more aware of God. Scientology carries forward a religious tradition extending ten thousand years and embraces truths found in the oldest sacred texts of the Hindu Veda and the wisdom of Buddhism. Scientology holds in common with all great religions the dream of peace on Earth and salvation for Man. What is new about Scientology is that it offers a precise path for bringing about spiritual improvement in the here and now and a way to accomplish it with absolute certainty."[37]

So, what is this "precise path?" *Dianetics* has its own vocabulary. Every human being is a *thetan*, an immortal spirit with potentially limitless powers. It gets a bit complicated, but each person has entered history and relinquished what is essentially godlike powers. *Engrams* are imprints on the mind, or remembrances, which recall negative feelings and experiences. Through *auditing*, these engrams can be removed and the individual restored to his or her original state. To have these engrams removed is to be "clean."

Through the processes of Scientology, individuals can return to a previous state of "god-ness" or perfection. All religions can bring a person ultimately to this state, but Scientology is the most efficient path.

Auditors are those qualified individuals who lead others through the process of cleansing. Individuals are directed to recall all sorts of perceptions, which are recorded in great detail by the auditor, who is assisted by the E-meter. This dianetic therapy removes the engrams and allows the individual to return to the thetan state.

The gulf between Scientology and historical Christianity is wide. Everything is different! Those looking for something new and novel will

certainly find it in Scientology, but they will not encounter, in any way, the Christianity of the Bible.

Worldwide Church of God

-- *Ch-ch-ch-ch-changes . . .* --

"Ch-ch-ch-ch-changes" is a refrain in David Bowie's 1972 recording of the "Changes." The website *Songfacts* has commented that the song "touches on Bowie's penchant for artistic reinvention."[38] Reinvention . . . now, that might be a good tag for the Worldwide Church of God. Herbert W. Armstrong's creation is not what it once was, though at least one splinter group has claimed to recover the pristine early teachings of the church. It's an interesting phenomenon.

History and Current Demographics

The Worldwide Church of God (formally given this name in 1968) is known to many through its publications, particularly the magazine *The Plain Truth,* and its radio and television broadcasts (*The World Tomorrow*). The church's founder, Herbert W. Armstrong (1892-1986), initially involved in the advertising business with dreams of great success and struggling with his wife's Seventh Day Adventist teachings, was baptized by a Baptist pastor. Eventually ordained by the Church of God (Seventh Day), his preaching and teaching focused a great deal on matters of prophecy, and his listeners and followers steadily grew in numbers.

After World War II, Armstrong moved to Pasadena, California, started his own independent ministry, and opened Ambassador College there in 1947, which was followed in succeeding years by other campuses. In 1956, Armstrong published a booklet entitled *1975 in Prophecy!*, which prophesied a nuclear war that would devastate mankind and prepare the way for Jesus' return.

Problems surfaced, among them the breach between Armstrong and his son, Garner Ted, in the early 1970s. That same decade saw a number of groups splinter off from Armstrong's group, financial difficulties and, of course, the failure of Armstrong's prophecy about Christ's return. When

Armstrong died in 1986, Joseph Tkach took the reins of leadership and began to make doctrinal changes, moving toward a more evangelical confession, and even seeing the church admitted into the membership of the National Association of Evangelicals. On May 7, 1997, the newly named, but much smaller, Grace Communion International published a news release under the title "NAE Accepts Worldwide Church of God."[39]

At its numerical pinnacle, the Worldwide Church of God was never very large. At one point, the leadership claimed over 100,000 followers. With the new doctrinal direction in 1997, and the division that occurred, one group, the Restored Church of God, has continued the teachings of Armstrong through *The Real Truth* magazine and *The World to Come* radio broadcast.

Key Doctrinal Issues

Because of the history, any consideration of doctrine must look at this group's doctrine pre- and post-Hebert W. Armstrong. Armstrong considered his movement as the only true church of God on earth, being restored under his leadership. He also considered himself as one of the great prophets God has given to the church.

Among the doctrinal distinctives of the Worldwide Church of God under Armstrong were the rejection of traditional Christian Trinitarianism, a view of the resurrection that had Jesus receiving a different body after death, a legalistic understanding of salvation, a strong emphasis on the seventh day of the week for worship, and autocratic leadership invested in one person. Armstrong's teaching argued that the British and American people, being the descendants of the nation of Israel, are the true Israel and thus blessed by God.

With the 1997 new direction and consequent name change, Grace Communion International has affirmed a belief statement that is sufficiently in agreement with historical Christianity that it has been received as a member of the National Association of Evangelicals. A quick glance at current literature will reveal continued concerns about financial and leadership issues, but in terms of basic doctrinal positions, the Worldwide Church of God/Grace Communion International has followed quite a path.

Unification Church

-- The cults go international --

In the latter part of the twentieth century, America was less and less successful at exporting to the world electronics, automobiles, and other manufactured goods. We were much better at exporting culture and fast food. But, apparently, not bad, either, at exporting the concept of a Christian cult.

History and Current Demographics

Raised in a Presbyterian family, at age 16 Sun Myung Moon (1920-2012) claimed to receive a vision in which Jesus instructed him to complete the work of bringing the kingdom of God and peace to the human race. Most significantly, Moon was instructed to have and to raise the ideal family, which Jesus was unable to have because of his death, and which would become a model for the world. Based on numerous charges, Moon was imprisoned in North Korea and moved to the south upon his release.

In 1954, in Seoul, Moon founded the Holy Spirit Association for the Unification of World Christianity. In the next year, Moon began to write *Divine Principle*, which became the foundational text for the Unification Church. He wrote:

> . . . a new expression of truth must appear. . . . Truth, of course, is unique, eternal, unchangeable, and absolute. The Bible, however, Is not the truth itself, but a textbook teaching the truth. . . When a brighter light appears, the mission of the old one fades.[40]

For Moon, that brighter light is found in *Divine Principle*.

Perhaps because of his support for the system of capitalism and his success as a businessman, he gained a following in the west, moving to upstate New York in 1972, from where he advanced his teachings. Anyone who has lived through the last decades of the twentieth century will likely recall numerous headlines and episodes associated with Moon and his "Moonies," the moniker by which his followers came to be known: massive

group weddings, young people selling flowers in the public square and witnessing, tax problems with the U.S. government, and deportation attempts.

"No one knows how many Unificationists there are worldwide. In the U.S., estimates range from 15,000 to 25,000. But the numbers have dropped since the 1970s, in part because many "blessed" children have left the fold."[41] Recently, there has been an effort at rejuvenation. The official website carries the headline: "Korean Church Launches Divine Principle Revival Campaign Nationwide."[42]

Key Doctrinal Issues

Along with the name of the founder of the Unification Church, perhaps the most frequently employed words you will discover while reading the literature are the words "unity" and "family." Moon reported, from his first vision, that God was instructing him to establish his own personal family as a model for the world.

The full name of the group -- the Unification Church, the Holy Spirit Association for the Unification of World Christianity – testifies to the primary goal for Moon, that is, the unification of all the world's churches and peoples under God. Moon taught that history is divided into three eras: the Adamic or Old Testament era, the era of Jesus and the New Testament, and the last era, or the "Completed Age," in which Moon has been raised up to complete the unfinished work of unification of the world's peoples under one God. This unification will take place largely through the establishment of rightly ordered families, which will complete the work of Jesus and bring about the perfect conditions on earth that existed in the Garden of Eden.

When she was tempted by Lucifer, Eve had sexual relations with him. This sin came between her and her true husband, Adam. Though joined together physically, her spiritual relationship with Adam was ruined. Not only that, but Adam and Even became servants of Lucifer, and all their descendants after them. Jesus came to restore these family relationships, and concurrently, a right relationship with God. However, his quest was cut short by the cross, and the task was left to be taken up by a third Adam. Typically, followers of Moon are quite circumspect about identifying Moon as that third Adam, or Messiah, but one cannot help but see the inferences.

Right marriage relationships will ultimately usher in God's kingdom

here on earth. Moon's aspirations, however, have not been obtained. Like so many other movements, the Unification Church has seen its share of unrealized prophecies about the end times and the fulfillment of the ideals of its founder.

The teachings at odds with historical Christianity are numerous: An extra-biblical ultimate authority, non-Trinitarian, faulty teaching about the fall and its consequences, a revised understanding of Jesus' ministry that is at odds with the New Testament, a different salvation, and a different understanding of heaven and hell . . . it's not a stretch to call this one a cult.

The Jesus Movement

-- No stinkin' organized religion! –

The Jesus Movement grew out of a desire to more wholly practice New Testament Christianity. Not so much a cult in the traditional sense, the movement might be more rightly described as an attempt at a restoration movement. Zondervan's quite comprehensive *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Cults, Sects, and World Religions* does not even have an entry for the Jesus Movement, though the movement is mentioned in relationship to several other groups.[43]

The Jesus Movement was a late 1960s and 1970s Christian counter-culture movement in response to the hippie culture, which itself was a counter-cultural movement. But it was also, in its own way, a rebellion against organized Christianity. As this author recalls, the maxim for the movement was something like: "I don't need no stinkin' organized religion. Just Jesus, my Bible, and me!" What in the world did they mean?

History and Current Demographics

The history of the Jesus Movement can be given quickly. As one looks back to the period in which the movement started, it seems not at all surprising that it possessed the characteristics that it did. The decade of the 60s was one of social, political, philosophical, and religious tumult. Young people from across the nation seemed intent on rebellion against every established norm.

At the root of the Jesus Movement seemed to be a desire to return to what was perceived as the pure, unadulterated Christianity of the New Testament. Unlike the other groups described here, the Jesus Movement points to no particular founder. It seems to have been almost a spontaneous trend that developed out of the context of the 60s.

By most accounts, the Jesus Movement began in 1967 with the opening of a small storefront evangelical mission called the Living Room in San Francisco's Haight Ashbury district. [44] Similar groups began to spring up across America. Coffee shops and outreach efforts were soon to follow.

Well-known individuals and entities associated with the movement included Arthur Blessitt and the His Place nightclub and coffee house for youth (on Sunset Strip in Hollywood), Jack Sparks from Campus Crusade, Chuck Smith of Calvary Chapel (Santa Ana, CA), and Bethel Tabernacle (Redondo Beach, CA).

The Jesus Movement employed various forms of communication, including underground newspapers and radio, and pioneered "Jesus Music," which was a contemporary combination of rock music and Christianity. Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth*, and his apocalyptic expectations, found a ready audience among those involved in the Jesus Movement.

In the early 1970s, a growing following resulted in significant space devoted to the movement in publications such as *Christianity Today*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Life*, *Rolling Stone*, and *U.S. News & World Report*. Though organized by Campus Crusade for Christ and not formally an event sponsored by the Jesus Movement, *Explo 72* is often described as one of the most significant events connected to this movement. A huge crowd gathered in June 1972 in

Dallas for several days of music, fellowship, and training in evangelism. Many in attendance were part of the Christian counter-culture of that day.

As the broader counter-culture receded in the mid-1970s, many Jesus groups disbanded or simply faded away. However, the movement did spawn, prepare the way for, or influence a number of groups, among them: the Children of God, the Alamo Christian Foundation, the Way International, Jesus People USA, and the Vineyard churches. Some of these groups are quite extreme.

Key Doctrinal Issues

The Jesus Movement was a counter-cultural restoration movement within the churches and Christian populations of the 1960s and 1970s. As such, it did not produce a formal statement of belief. A number of highlights, however, can be noted.

The Jesus Movement understood Christianity to be a radical separation from culture, particularly the culture of the 60s and 70s, and a return to a purer form of Christianity than was represented in the churches. Thus, the movement tended to remain on the fringe of the evangelical world. Emphasis was placed on experience more so than on dogma, and on "the simple gospel." Informal worship, spontaneity, countercultural lifestyles, and new styles of music were hallmarks. An apocalyptic hope influenced everything; people were living in the last days. Many tended to accept and practice the charismatic gifts of healing and speaking in tongues. It was not a case of "anything goes," but it certainly was not "business as usual."

Chapter 3

What should I do?

My wife and I once stood on our front porch talking with two young men who had knocked on our door. They talked, and we responded. I was well into telling the story of the gospel when one interrupted, "You're a preacher, aren't you?" I inquired as to why he asked and was quite discouraged by his answer, "Well, you seem to know the Bible so well."

What? Discouraged? That I knew the Bible? Of course, the young man's implication was that many (most?) Christians do not know the Bible well and are not well equipped to tell the good news of the gospel. Only preachers can do that. Not good!

Study the Scriptures in Order to Share the Gospel

Not only preachers, but all believers should know the Scriptures. The question naturally arises, though, why should the Christian study and know the Scriptures? A number of answers can be given, all necessary and important, but one stands out: We study the Word of God so that we can know the gospel and give it to others.

Why do we study the Scriptures?

We study the Scriptures because *they tell us about God and ourselves.* The Bible is THE story of history, of how, in the beginning, the one and only perfect God created everything. Of how sin entered the world and ruined it. Of the Creator's plan to make right what was wrong. Of how it will all end. We cannot comprehend the world as it really is unless we understand the story that is told in the Bible.

We study the Scriptures because *they tell us about the Savior, Jesus Christ.* The enemies of Jesus had relentlessly opposed him and sought to

discredit him and his ministry. John reports Jesus' defense of himself on one occasion. Jesus had identified several faithful witnesses that affirmed him and his ministry: John the Baptist, the works that Jesus himself performed, and the Father. Jesus concluded his defense, "You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; it is these that testify about Me" (John 5:39; NAS). Jesus knew his audience on this occasion, and he knew they would not receive him. Nevertheless, he explained that the Scriptures, which the scribes and Pharisees held in such high esteem, actually told about him!

We find the Savior in the Scriptures. The Old Testament prophecies tell us about the Messiah and his future birth and ministry. The New Testament tells us that he has come. We learn who this Savior is. He is the eternal, second person of the Trinity. He is the Son of God. But he is also fully human, born of a virgin. We also learn what he has done. He lived a perfect life without sin. He took the sins of his people upon himself and paid the penalty that was due. In turn, Jesus has given to his people his own righteousness. He died. He was buried, but the grave could not hold him. He was resurrected. He appeared to his disciples, and he returned to heaven. He will one day come again and rule forever in righteousness.

We study the Scriptures *for our benefit and growth in righteousness.* The Psalmist declared, "Happy is the man [whose] delight is in the Lord's instruction, and he meditates on it day and night" (Psalm 1:1-2). So vital to his life were the Scriptures that the Psalmist testified, "Your word is a lamp for my feet and a light for my path" (Psalm 119-105). In his prayer for his disciples, Jesus prayed to the Father, "Sanctify them by the truth; Your word is truth" (John 17:17).

How did the apostle Paul put it? "For whatever was written in the past was written for our instruction, so that we may have hope through endurance and through the encouragement from the Scriptures" (Romans 15:4). We cannot be all that God would have us to be without knowing the Scriptures.

We study the Scriptures so that *we can know the story and tell it to others*. Only when people hear the story and believe will they be saved. Again, hear the apostle Paul: "For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. But how can they call on Him they have not believed in? And how can they believe without hearing about Him? And how can they hear without a preacher? And how can they preach unless they be sent?

As it is written: How beautiful are the feet of those who announce the gospel of good things!" (Romans 10:13-15). Another apostle, Peter, wrote to those who were suffering for their faith, "Always be ready to give a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you" (1Peter 3:15).

We study the Scriptures, not only in order to invite others to come to the Savior, but also *to instruct them in all things pertaining to godliness*. In the Great Commission of Matthew 28 Jesus commands not merely that we "get people saved," but that we "make disciples . . . teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19-20).

As one thinks about cults, an additional reason for studying the Scriptures comes to mind. In a time when many were being deceived by false teachers, Paul instructed Timothy: "But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed. . . . you have known the sacred Scriptures, which are able to give you wisdom for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, for rebuking, for correcting, for training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:14-17).

Admittedly, Paul's instruction to young Timothy includes a number of matters already noted: salvation, teaching, and training in righteousness. Because of the presence of false teaching, Paul adds that Timothy *must rebuke and correct*. Peter warned about false teachers and the dangers they introduced into the churches (2 Peter 2). Greatly concerned about false teachers, Jude wrote, "I found it necessary to write and exhort you to contend for the faith that was delivered to the saints once for all" (Jude 3). We not only share the good news of the gospel, but we contend for the gospel and we correct false teachings that threaten it.

What is the "main thing" we find in the Scriptures?

Mark Seifrid's observation, once again, is helpful as we ponder this question: "No article of any confession compares in significance with that concerning salvation. The whole of theology is bound up with it: our understanding God, the world and our very selves. The manner in which we understand salvation decides and reveals the way in which we think about God, and vice versa."[45]

The answer to the above question? The gospel! Missionaries often talk about "doing the main thing." That is, faced with unimaginable poverty, sickness and death, and desperately desiring to help alleviate such suffering, missionaries have to remind themselves that their people have an even greater need. That greater need is answered only with the biblical gospel.

Luke noted the Athenians' fondness for speculative conversation: "Now all the Athenians and the foreigners residing there spent their time on nothing else but telling or hearing something new" (Acts 17:21). Paul reinforces the accuracy of Luke's report when he counsels Timothy to avoid such speculations. On those occasions when Timothy had opportunity to teach the word of truth, Paul warned: "But avoid irreverent, empty speech, for this will produce an even greater measure of godlessness" (2 Timothy 2:16) and "But reject foolish and ignorant disputes, knowing that they breed quarrels" (2 Timothy 2:23).

Christians must be careful that they do not get caught up, like those in the Greco-Roman world, in babbling and in unimportant, even harmful, matters. This counsel brings us back to the "first thing," that is, our priority, the gospel. Paul had no hesitancy in saying what the gospel is:

> Now brothers, I want to clarify for you the gospel I proclaimed to you; you received it and have taken your stand on it. You are also saved by it, if you hold to the message I proclaimed to you—unless you believed for no purpose. For I passed on to you as most important what I also received:
>
> that Christ died for our sins
> according to the Scriptures,
> that He was buried,
> that He was raised on the third day
> according to the Scriptures,
> and that He appeared to Cephas,
> then to the Twelve. . . .
> then to all the apostles. (1 Corinthians 15:1-5,7)

Here is THE message that we must know and declare. As Paul explained, the gospel is that which is "most important." The Bible has much to say about a variety of topics and issues. The Christian faces

many different situations in ministry, and at various times must give different types of counsel according to the immediate situation. But there is a basic message, a primary message, a message of the greatest importance that must be delivered. What is that message? It's the gospel!

In 1 Corinthians 9:19-23, Paul reminds believers that they must meet people where they are in life. The idea is a good one. Positively, it requires the Christian to meet people where they are and to bring them to Christ. If I want to reach a group of homeless people in the inner city of a metropolis, probably, I should not wear a three-piece suit on the streets and under the bridges where they hang out. They are likely to identify me as someone from the police or the government, someone they prefer not to deal with. I will change into more casual clothes, or else I will have a hard time getting near them. If I am trying to reach someone in a non-Christian religion, perhaps I need to dialogue a bit with that person about family, struggles, desires, and life in general.

One might ask, "Meeting people where they are . . .hmmm. Must I become a drug addict in order to reach drug addicts for Christ? Must I become an alcoholic in order to reach alcoholics? Must I immerse myself into a cult lifestyle in order to reach people for Christ?" Of course, even as we acknowledge that having walked in the shoes of another might be of assistance for empathizing with that person, the answer to these questions is a resounding, "No!"

Great care needs to be taken here. A popular idea is that our task in ministry is to meet the perceived needs of those to whom we go. Evangelicals sometimes push back against this notion, as if the meeting of perceived needs necessarily excludes a gospel witness. In fact, Jesus had a lot to say about meeting perceived needs. Often, perceived needs are real needs. Consider . . . if someone is hungry, he senses (perceives) that he needs food. Jesus teaches us that we are to feed that person. If someone is thirsty, she senses (perceives) that she needs water. Jesus instructs us to give her something to drink. If someone is wounded, Jesus tells us that we are to bind up tthat person's wounds. Jesus spent much of his earthly ministry meeting these very sorts of needs.

There is nothing wrong with saying to anyone that Christ is able to meet a person's every need. In international contexts, the missionary will often encounter those whose worldview tells them their greatest need is protection from the evil spirits. Can Jesus protect a person from the evil

spirits? Of course he can! He has made all things, and he sovereignly and powerfully rules over all his creation (see Colossians 1:16-17).

Can Jesus heal? Yes, he is the Great Physician! Can Jesus patch up a broken marriage? Yes, his name is Wonderful Counselor. Can Jesus meet a financial need? Yes! After all, he owns the cattle on a thousand hills. In fact, he owns the hills upon which they graze! Jesus can, and does, meet these needs and more. But a greater need exists, a need that can be met only by the gospel.

Cult leaders often focus on specific, real-world needs and reach out to those who desperately hope for answers to their problems. Discouraged by the breakdown of society? Maybe the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, with its insistence on a wholesome lifestyle, can help you overcome your discouragement. Family problems? Maybe the Unification Church and its teachings on the ideal marriage and family will provide the answers you need. Revolted, or just bored, by the traditionalism of organized Christianity? Why not try something like the Jesus Movement?

If you have never read John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, you should do so. It's a wonderful allegory about salvation and the Christian life. The main character in the story, Christian, finds himself on a pilgrimage from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City. Early in the story, Christian loses his way and comes upon a man whose name is Evangelist. Bunyan lets us in on the conversation (in the old English in which Bunyan wrote).

> Christian, looking upon Evangelist very carefully, said, “Whither must I fly?”
> Then said Evangelist, pointing with his finger over a very wide field, "Do you see yonder Wicket Gate?”
> The man said, “No.”
> Then said the other, “Do you see yonder Shining Light?”
> He said, “I think I do.”
> Then said Evangelist, “Keep that light in thine eye, and go up directly thereto, so shalt thou see the Gate; at which, when thou knockest, it shall be told thee what thou shalt do.”

The friends of the paralyzed man brought him to Jesus for healing, and Jesus was happy to meet that need, but only after declaring to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven" (Mark 2:5; also Matthew 9:1-7; Luke

5:17-26). The woman at the well (John 4:1-26) desired that Jesus give her water. Jesus understood her thirst, for she had said, "Sir, give me this water so I won't get thirsty and come here to draw water." Her perceived need was water. And it was a real need. But Jesus knew her greatest need and offered her "a well of water springing up . . . for eternal life" (John 4:14).

After healing the invalid at the pool of Bethesda, on that same day, Jesus encountered the man in the temple and instructed him regarding his sin (John 5:14), which was a much greater threat to him than his former paralysis.

Here's the thing. The Bible has the answers to all our needs. That we have not always been effective at appropriating those answers for ourselves or providing them to others, and that people go looking for answers in all the wrong places, does not mean that the answers are not available. They are found in the pages of Scripture. We have a God who is concerned about people and their real-world needs, and we must likewise be concerned. But having met all those needs, if we fail to give the answer to the greatest need of all, then we have failed. The cults do not have the gospel answer. We do! Jesus provided the answer! Paul gave a clear answer. Evangelist was able to give clear directions. Can we be clear? Can you be clear?

Consider a Few, Final Thoughts and Words of Counsel

Remember, the purpose of this little book has not been to provide a comprehensive overview of cults. Many materials are available for additional reading and study. The titles of some can be found in the short, annotated bibliography at the end of this work. Rather, the reader has been introduced, in the briefest manner, to some basic questions and to selected groups from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Along the way, as we have thought about cults, perhaps you have reached some conclusions about what you should do and how you should respond. Below are some thoughts and lessons that come to my mind.

Lessons discovered

Let's think about the groups we have encountered and what their

histories and teachings can tell us. The subtitle for the material on the Mormons was *Does success equal legitimacy?* Success in this instance would be defined as significant numbers and increased societal acceptance. The problem is that neither of these factors compensates for the failure to adhere to essential biblical teaching. "Too big to fail" has been added to the popular American vocabulary. A variation on this theme might be "too big to criticize." We live in a time when political correctness has seemingly impacted everything we do and say. In this context, has the Mormon Church gained sufficient clout to escape criticism? We must respond that whatever improvement Mormonism has seen in its standing in society, the gospel is the good news that every Mormon needs.

The Seventh Day Adventists remind us that it is possible to go far toward a full, robust affirmation of truth while still affirming significantly deviant doctrines. Adventists have been open to continuing revelations. Consequently, they have exalted Ellen G. White and her writings to authoritative status, which diminishes the Bible as THE authoritative revelation from God. Without that anchor, i.e., the Bible alone as the Word of God, the Adventist teachings on the afterlife and the investigative judgment are not surprising.

All the level-one errors of Jehovah's Witnesses – the anti-Trinitarianism, the teaching that Jesus is the created firstborn of God, a wrong view of the atonement, a doctrine of annihilation, the two-class teaching, and the Witnesses as the only present legitimate expression of God's people – leave no doubt as to how far removed from the biblical gospel is this group. Similarly, Christian Science, the Church of Scientology, and the Unification Church err on fundamental, essential biblical teachings.

The Worldwide Church of God, now Grace Communion International, is a bit of an anomaly. Once clearly outside the mainstream of orthodox Christianity, WCG has taken sufficiently significant strides toward historical Christian doctrine that it has been admitted as a member of the National Association of Evangelicals. While concerns exist about the overall orthodoxy of the church, it is a reminder that our God is able to transform, not only individuals, but entire groups.

The Jesus Movement provides a cautionary tale. The desire for an unadulterated and relevant faith should serve as encouragement toward relevance and the pursuit of a purer faith in our own churches. However, in the search for a purer faith, the Jesus Movement tended to focus on

experience at the expense of precise doctrine. The subjective nature of the teaching bore fruit in the formation of some quite extreme groups. Doctrine and faithfulness to the truth really do matter.

As we close . . .

As we close this study, we need to *remember that we do indeed live in a pluralistic society*. We cannot hide from this reality. We ignore it at our own peril and at the peril of our children. Furthermore, to run and hide or to put our heads in the sand is to be disobedient to the instructions of God himself and to miss out on opportunities for gospel witness that abound.

Here, in America, in regard to the matter of religion, we are free to follow whomever or whatever we please, to believe anything. This freedom is ours because of the First Amendment in the Bill of Rights: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances." I cannot recall the source, but someone has suggested that the amendment might be paraphrased: "We have the right to produce religion." And produce it, we have! All sorts of religions and groups!

So many groups, but *Bible believing Christians have better answers!* In particular, we have THE answer to THE most perilous predicament human beings face. That answer is the gospel. A common characteristic of cults is the search for "the one true church of God." Each founder thought he or she had found it. And convinced followers have passionately promoted the founder's teachings. The situation is sort of like discovering a great restaurant or movie. You just want to tell someone. You're convinced. You're passionate. You can't keep quiet about your discovery.

We have the gospel, and we want to tell it! The passion and the desire are there. But how do we tell it? In no particular order, consider the following.

We must never substitute for the best that which is merely good. We must never major on the important while disregarding that which is truly vital. There are many good and important ministries we can be involved in, many good things we will do, but the ministry of the gospel is always, as Paul

put it, "of first importance."

We will see shortcomings in our own churches. We must not allow those shortcomings to dishearten us and turn us away from biblical religion.

When talking with cult members, nothing will be gained by arrogant condemnation. This is not to say that we cannot identify error. In fact, we must. But ugly arrogance is unlikely to produce any good fruit and is likely to be a conversation stopper.

In a conversation with a cult member, a good beginning might be to listen politely. When approached by someone from one of the above groups, one of my rules of thumb is to offer, "I'll be glad to hear what you have to say if you will give me equal time." Of course, my time will be used to point the person to the gospel.

Our goal is not to prove a person wrong and to demonstrate that we are right. We must be determined not merely to win an argument, but to win the person to Christ.

Balance is good. Personal testimony about my own experience with the Savior is powerful. At the same time, be sure to use in your witness the Word of God itself. Sometimes we are cautioned, "Be careful how you live. The only Jesus they might ever see is the Jesus they see in you." There's truth here, isn't there? We must be careful how we live. We are under obligation to live according to God's instruction. Obedience to the Word is not optional, but a requirement for the Christian. On the other hand, if the only Jesus they ever see is the Jesus formed in me, they will be looking at a very deficient Jesus, indeed! The Jesus we tell about is the Jesus about whom the Bible speaks. Use the Word.

Show deep personal interest in a person, not as a cultist, but as a human being. A caring, sensitive, loving manner will go a long way toward an effective witness.

Pray! Ask the Lord for opportunities for witness. When the Lord opens that door, ask him to prosper your witness. We can shop around for the latest and greatest strategies. We can emulate ministries that we consider successful. We can talk to experts. We can research. We can read books on cults and new religious movements. However, if our God is indeed the Lord of the harvest, then the most important thing we might do is pray to the Lord of the harvest to bring it in.

And then, there is this. One of the typical characteristics of a cult is its legalistic teaching and authoritative control over members. Jesus was a

law-giver, but the instructions he has given us, unlike those of the cults, are life-giving. They do not lead to bondage, but to freedom. They do not weary; rather, they bring joy. The words of Jesus are grace filled.

Recently, I was reading the Sermon on the Mount: "Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are they that mourn . . . (Matthew 5; KJV). In the sermon, Jesus continued to teach about the blessedness his disciples experience and the joy that is ours, that we are salt and a light, etc. And even when Jesus gets into the real meaty parts of the law – murder, adultery, divorce, lying – one gets a sense that this teaching is not mere legalism, but a kingdom ethic that brings peace and joy to the believer and glory to the Father. Go the second mile. Love your enemy. Pray. Give. Trust the Lord and rest in his provisions. Be sure I am in the right before I begin to point my finger at others. Build on the rock. These are grace filled words. In all the world, there is no equivalent. And we have the joy and privilege of sharing this good news with others!

This work we have been given, that which Paul calls "the ministry of reconciliation" (2 Corinthians 5:18), is difficult. But it's worth it. With Paul, we will be able to say, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. There is reserved for me in the future the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give me on that day, and not only to me, but to all those who have loved His coming" (2 Timothy 4:7-8). May it be so!

Selected Annotated Bibliography

Not at all a complete list. Just a few books you might find helpful.

*Asterisks identify works considered by this author to be most valuable.

Braswell, George W., Jr. *Understanding Sectarian Groups in America*, revised. Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994. 375 pages.

Understanding Sectarian Groups in America is an older standard work from George Braswell, who served as Professor of Missions and World Religions at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. The volume examines both world religions and what Braswell calls "sectarian groups" in America ("Sectarian groups." Ah, yet another term for these groups!). It looks at their histories, major teachings, practices, and how they differ from historic Christianity.

Dawson, Lorne L. ed. *Cults and New Religious Movements: A Reader*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003. 297 pages.

The subtitle, *A Reader*, informs that this volume is a compilation of articles and chapters from various authors. It is quite academic in its approach and treats cults and new religious movements using a topical approach. Among the topics: "The Scientific Study of Religion," "Who Joins New Religious Movements and Why," "The 'Brainwashing' Controversy," "Violence and New Religious Movements," and "Sex and Gender Issues." Generally, not an evangelical perspective, yet a helpful overview for beginning to think about some issues related to cults.

Gallagher, Eugene V. and Michael Ashcraft. *Introduction to New and Alternative Religions in America*, 4 volumes. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press. 1110 pages.

In succession, the individual volumes treat history and controversies; Jewish and Christian traditions; metaphysical, new age, and neopagan movements; and Asian traditions. Quite an extensive look at new and alternative religions. The editors are concerned that bigotry and

misunderstanding have created a dangerous situation for many groups. They aim to address this situation through a clear and honest and objective description of new and alternative religions. Not an evaluation from a biblical perspective; nevertheless, helpful and comprehensive information is provided.

*Hutchinson, Janis. *Out of the Cults & Into the Church: Understanding and Encouraging Ex-Cultists*. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1994. 224 pages.

The book is not a typical overview or introduction to cults, nor does it provide a roadmap for witnessing to members of cults. Drawing on her own experiences – personal struggles as she left Mormonism – Hutchinson focuses on the problems people face when they leave cults and receive the gospel. At the end of each chapter dealing with a cult, the author includes a section entitled "How Can Christians Help." Very helpful.

*Jenkins, Philip. *Mystics and Messiahs: Cults and New Religions in American History*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000. 294 pages.

We have noted the increasingly pluralistic nature of American society. Jenkins observes that we tend to think of the contemporary American situation as "a frightening novelty, with few or no historical parallels" (5). In fact, the 19th and 20th centuries provided fertile ground for the establishment of new religious groups in America. Jenkins provides a scholarly, yet very readable, journey through this history.

Lewis, James R. and Jesper Aagaar Petersen. *Controversial New Religions*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005. 483 pages.

Offers what is described as "a scholarly, dispassionate look at those groups that have generated the most controversy." Not particularly helpful if you are looking for a Christian response to these groups. The book is valuable, though, for its examination of some of the more unusual and controversial groups.

*Martin, Walter. *The Kingdom of the Cults*, revised edition. Grand Rapids, MI: Bethany House Publishers, 2003. 704 pages.

For almost half a century, Martin's *Kingdom of the Cults* has been considered the authoritative book on cults. From the book cover:

"Scholarly yet readable and engaging. *The Kingdom of the Cults* evaluates each cult's history and beliefs, contrasting individual teachings with true biblical theology. Readers will find apologetics help in dealing with cults not only at home but overseas."

*Nichols, Larry A., George A. Mather, and Alvin J. Schmidt, editors. *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Cults, Sects, and World Religions*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006. 543 pages.

If you wish to purchase one survey of cults, sects, and world religions, this might be the book for you. It is quite comprehensive in the number of groups it examines. "The authors evaluate the beliefs and practices of each group from the perspective of the Bible and the historic creeds of the Christian church. You'll also find group histories, numerous illustrations, charts, current statistics, websites, bibliographies, and other useful information." (from the back cover)

Stark, Rodney. *What Americans Really Believe: New Findings from the Baylor Surveys of Religion*. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2008. 209 pages.

Rodney Stark is Professor of Social Sciences and Co-Director of the Institute of Studies of Religion at Baylor University. He has given direction to this study, which is not a study about cults or new religious movements. It "gives a detailed, comprehensive, often surprising snapshot of the most current impulses in American religion. The results of this survey are an indispensable resource for understanding the American public." --George H. Gallup, Jr. (from the back cover) Also a valuable resource for understanding the American soil out of which so many cults and new religions have grown.

*Tucker, Ruth. *Another Gospel: Alternative Religions and the New Age Movement*. Grand Rapids, MI: Academie Books, 1989. 462 pages.

One of the most accessible introductions to cults and alternative religions. Very readable and quite comprehensive. Though they can easily be found on the internet, Tucker's "Appendix B: Cultic Statements of Belief" helpfully gathers into one location the statements of faith of different groups. In addition to the treatment of the major groups, Tucker provides a lengthy appendix in which she introduces many lesser-known

groups.

Notes

[1]Unless otherwise noted, all Bible quotations are from the *Holman Christian Standard Bible*.

[2] Terry Muck, "Folk Religions," Class lecture, Asbury Theological Seminary (Wilmore, KY), September 5, 2000.

[3]Thus, Anthony Wallace defines religion as "belief and ritual concerned with supernatural beings, powers, and forces." *Religion: An Anthropological View* (New York: Random House, 1966), 5.

[4]John B. Noss, *Man's Religions*, 6th ed (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1980), 115.

[5]Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*, rev ed (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 160.

[6]This author's personal recollection of Terry Muck's lecture from the class "Folk Religion," Wilmore, KY: Asbury Theological Seminary, September 5, 2000.

[7]In *Another Gospel: Cults, Alternative Religions, and the New Age Movement* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1989), 20, Ruth Tucker provides a helpful definition of world religions: ". . . religious movements that have attained a status recognized worldwide for their embodiment of particular sacred traditions."

[8]Lorne Dawson has noted that "[t]he label 'cult' is still a technical term in the scholarship on religion, like the terms 'church' or 'sect.' Lorne L Dawson, ed. *Cults and New Religious Movements: A Reader* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 2. However, recognizing the "pejorative connotation" this term often possesses, Dawson determines to use the terminology "new religious movement." This author has decided to use the term "cult" and to highlight the significant divergences of the cults from historical Christianity while, at the same time, pleading for a warm, loving, and gospel-focused approach to cult followers.

[9]Ruth Tucker has observed, "A cult is someone else's religious group that does not agree with mine." Ibid., 15.

[10]For example, Milton Yinger has identified as the major characteristic of a cult a withdrawal from a larger group. Milton J. Yinger, *Religion, Society, and the Individual: An Introduction to the Sociology of Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1957), 154. Additional traits he includes are small size, the search for mystical experience, charismatic leadership, a sharp break in religious terms with society, and concern almost wholly with problems of individuals as opposed to society or social order. Andrew J. Pavlos, *The Cult Experience* (University of Michigan: Greenwood Press, 1982), 10-12, has included as major components of a cult: a strong leader, the dependence of individuals on the group for meeting needs, and isolation and seclusion from the outside world. J. Gordon Melton and Robert L. Moore, *The Cult Experience: Responding to the New Religious Pluralism* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1982), 17, in one definition, understand a cult to be a "religious group that presents a distinctly alternative pattern for doing religion and adhering to a faith perspective than that dominant in the culture," thus stressing the deviance of the cult from the larger group faith perspective.

[11]Matthew J. Slick, *Right Answers for Wrong Beliefs* (Kent, England: Sovereign World Ltd., 2001), 63,64.

[12]"Loose Cult Talk," *Christianity Today* (March 1, 2006), 27.

[13]Tertullian, "Apology" in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol 3, reprint (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), 46.

[14]Martha Sherrill, "The Spiritual Revolution," *Oprah.com*, (May 2008), accessed 11 June 2013, http://www.oprah.com/spirit/Seeking-Spirituality-in-America; Internet.

[15]Cathy Lynn Grossman, "Survey: More have dropped dogma for spirituality in U.S.," *USA Today* (July 2, 2008), accessed 11 June 2013, http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/religion/2008-06-23-pew-religions_N.htm; Internet.

[16]"Surprising results from an exclusive PARADE poll: How Spiritual Are We?" *Parade* (Oct. 4, 2009), accessed 11 June 2013, http://www.parade.com/news/2009/10/04-how-spiritual-are-we.html; Internet.

[17]Cathy Lynn Grossman, "Spirituality in America: For Many, A Life Of Losing Religion," *The Huffington Post* (Jan 5, 2012), accessed 11 June 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/news/spirituality-in-america; Internet.

[18]R. Albert Mohler, "A Call for Theological Triage and Christian Maturity," *AlbertMohler.com* (July 12, 2005), accessed 14 June 2013, http://www.albertmohler.com/2005/07/12/a-call-for-theological-triage-and-christian-maturity/; Internet.

[19]Mark Seifrid, "Salvation," *An Exposition from the Faculty of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary on The Baptist Faith and Message 2000*, accessed 14 June 2013, http://www.sbts.edu/documents/bfmexposition. pdf; Internet.

[20]Gordon B. Hinckley, former President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, noted, "We are Christians in a very real sense and that is coming to be more and more widely recognized. Once upon a time people everywhere said we are not Christians. They have come to recognize that we are, and that we have a very vital and dynamic religion based on the teachings of Jesus Christ." *Frequently Asked Questions: Are Mormons Christians?* accessed 17 June 2013, http://mormon.org/faq; Internet.

[21]Detailed histories of the Mormon Church can be found in many introductory works. Aspects of Joseph Smith's life can be gleaned from his personal narrative found in *The Pearl of Great Price*, one of the primary scriptures of the Mormon faith

[22]"Growth of the Church," *Newsroom of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints*, accessed 5 August, 2013, http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/topic/church-growth.

[23]"Facts and Statistics," *The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints Newsroom*, accessed 17 June 2013, http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/facts-and-stats; Internet.

[24]This and other doctrinal positions are stated in "Articles of Faith: Thirteen basic points of belief to which Mormons subscribe," accessed 17 June 2013, http://mormon.org/beliefs/articles-of-faith; Internet.

[25]James E. Talmage, *Articles of Faith: A Series of Lectures on the Principal Doctrines of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints*, 11th ed (Salt Lake City: The Deseret News, 1919), 315.

[26]Stephen E. Robinson, "God the Father: Overview," *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, accessed 18 June 2013, http://eom.byu.edu/index.php/God_the_Father; Internet.

[27]Ruth Tucker, *Another Gospel*, 93, has observed: "the controversy has raged for decades

as to whether this religious group is a 'cult' or an evangelical Protestant denomination." Walter Martin, in his classic book *Kingdom of the Cults*, devoted an appendix of almost one hundred pages – "The Puzzle of Seventh-day Adventism" – to a discussion of SDA. He asked if it is a cult, and in the end, he answered, "No." George W. Braswell, in *Understanding Sectarian Groups in America*, rev ed (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), does not include SDA in his list of groups.

[28]"Guidelines for Sabbath Observance" accessed 21 June 2013, http://www.adventist.org/beliefs/other-documents/other-doc6.html; Internet.

[29]"Seventh Day Adventist Church: Fundamental Beliefs: The Gift of Prophecy," accessed 21 June 2013, http://www.adventist.org/beliefs/fundamental/index.html; Internet.

[30]"Quick Statistics on the Seventh-day Adventist Churh," Office of Archives, Statistics, and Research, accessed 22 June 2013, http://www.adventistarchives.org/quick-statistics-on-the-seventh-day-adventist-church#.UgKfx23zOJQ.

[31]Tucker, *Another Gospel*, 106.

[32]"About Jehovah's Witnesses: Fast Facts—Worldwide," accessed 22 June 2013, http://www.jw.org/en/ jehovahs-witnesses/; Internet.

[33]"Why is Jesus Called God's Son?" accessed 22 June 2013, http://www.jw.org/en/bible-teachings/ questions/jesus-gods-son/; Internet

[34]"Churches and societies," accessed 22 June 2013, http://christianscience.com/church-of-christ-scientist/about-the-church-of-christ-scientist/churches-and-societies; Internet.

[35]Stoyan Zaimov, "Christian Scientists Looking to Grow Membership amid Shrinking Numbers," *The Christian Post* (June 14, 2012), accessed 24 June 2013, http://global.christianpost.com/news/christian-scientists-looking-to-grow-membership-amid-shrinking-numbers-76536/#gCPJAy8fg2HcsthZ.99; Internet.

[36]Lafayette R. Hubbard, "Device for Measuring and Indicating Changes in Resistance of a Living Body" (Filed in the United States Patent Office June 7, 1965), accessed 24 June 2013, http://www.google.com/patents?id=OVpxAAAAEBAJ&printsec=abstract&zoom=4#v=onepage&q&f=false; Internet.

[37]"Scientology: Frequently Asked Questions: Why is Scientology called a religion?" accessed 24 June 2013, http://www.scientology.org/faq/background-and-basic-principles/why-is-scientology-called-a-religion.html; Internet.

[38]"Songfacts: Changes by Davie Bowie," accessed 25 June 2013, http://www.songfacts.com/detail.php?id= 3414; Internet.

[39]"NAE Accepts Worldwide Church of God," National Association of Evangelicals Press Release (May 7, 1997), accessed 25 June 2013, http://www.gci.org/aboutus/nae; Internet. Also see "The Road to Damascus? Long written off as a cult, WCG takes an evangelical step," *World Magazine* 11 (Apr. 27, 1996), 18 and "Worldwide Church of God seeks a new start in the face of fresh opposition," *Christianity Today* 47 (July, 2003), 22,23.

[40]Sun Myung Moon, *Divine Principle* (New York: The Holy Spirit Association for the Unification of World Christianity, 1973), 16.

[41]Barbara Bradley Hagerty, "Unification Church Woos a Second Generation," *All Things Considered*, National Public Radio (Feb 17, 2010), accessed 25 June 2013, http://www.npr.org/2010/02/17/123805954/ unification-church-woos-a-second-generation; Internet.

[42]Lymhwa Kim and Krista Karjalainen, "Korean Church Launches Divine Principle Revival Campaign Nationwide," *Unification News* (Nov 6, 2012).

[43]Check on this. Also, give bibliographic info.

[44]This history is an abridgment of the history provided on the Jesus Movement website. David Di Sabatino, "History of the Jesus Movement," accessed 26 June 2013, http://www.one-way.org/jesusmovement/; Internet.

[45]Mark Seifrid, "Salvation."